

MONITORING REPORT ON THE FEDERALLY FUNDED FLOATING TEACHER PROGRAM

Laurel Tumarkin, author

April 19, 2001

Introductory note by Noreen Connell, EPP Executive Director Because of elementary school overcrowding, federal “class size reduction” funding has not been used to reduce class sizes, but instead has been used to hire extra teachers to work with classroom teachers for some portion of the school day. These teachers are called “floating” teachers in most schools, but in some schools they are called “push-in” teachers, shorthand for teachers that come into the classroom to provide remediation services for children.

EPP’s 2000 monitoring report, *Smaller is Better*, primarily looked at schools where early-grade class sizes had been reduced with state funds, but staff interviews were also conducted at two schools using floating teachers. One school, which had previously been featured in EPP’s report on high-achieving schools in low-income neighborhoods, had assigned the floating teacher to two classes. The staff interviews evidenced some satisfaction with this program, though the arrangement was viewed as not as desirable as reducing class sizes. In the second school in the report, the floating teacher had been assigned to five classes and was dissatisfied with being spread so thinly, because she felt she was not getting to know the children or their parents.

In the second year of the implementation of this federal program, EPP decided to take a closer look at the assignments of floating teachers and staff perceptions of the usefulness of the program. According to initial allocation schedules issued by the Division of Budget Operations and Review on June 22, 2001 (BOR No.1), \$53.5 million was to be allocated for floating teachers in the 2000-01 school year. This monitoring study consisted of a review of system wide assignments and school-site interviews in three schools by Laurel Tumarkin. At our request, the central office of the Board of Education provided us with data on all the assignments of floating teachers. Most community school districts, however, did not cooperate in allowing us to visit schools for the purpose of interviewing floating teachers, classroom teachers, and administrators about the federal program. We want to thank for Laurel for her steadfast dedication to this project and her careful attention to both detail and the perceptions of school-level staff.

Review of Floating Teacher Assignments

The ‘program cards,’ or weekly schedules, of 563 floating teachers working at 220 schools throughout New York City were reviewed. At our request, these program cards were made available to the Educational Priorities Panel by the New York City Board of Education’s Office of Early Childhood Education. Here are our findings:

1. Over one third (221) of the teachers whose program cards were reviewed worked with students from only one or two classes; about one quarter (141) worked with students from three or four classes; and over a third (201) worked with students from five or more classes. In other words, the number of teachers being assigned to work with students from five or more classes is almost the same as the number of teachers being assigned to work with students from one or two classes. See the last page for a breakdown of assignments by borough.
2. The number of classroom assignments in the last category, five classes or more, was surprising. Two teachers were assigned to work with students from as many as twenty-nine different classes. Although only six teachers worked with students from more than twenty classes, thirty-nine teachers worked with students from ten or more classes.

Review of Interviews Conducted at Schools Using Floating Teachers

In order to assess the usage of floating teachers in early-grade classrooms, a representative of the Educational Priorities Panel visited three different elementary schools and interviewed thirteen school staff members. She spoke to floating teachers, classroom teachers who are working with floating teachers, principals, and an assistant principal. Because of the small number of schools visited and staff members interviewed, the information gathered cannot be viewed as a representative account of the use of floating teachers throughout the New York City public school system. The information gathered is valuable, however, in that it sheds light on the experiences that schools are having as they incorporate floating teachers into their classrooms. Below is a list of strengths and weaknesses of using floating teachers, as reported by the school staff members interviewed in three separate schools. EPP promised that the identities of the staff and school would be kept confidential.

STRENGTHS

- **Working as a floating teacher provides new teachers with a chance to develop their skills under the guidance of more experienced teachers.**

“Being a floating teacher is a great training ground.”
- Kindergarten floating teacher in Brooklyn

“It’s a great experience to get to know different methods of teaching and ways of setting up a classroom.”- First grade floating teacher in Brooklyn

- Having a floating teacher in a classroom means that there are two teachers there to provide both instruction and classroom discipline.

“Having an extra set of hands and eyes to help the kids out is great. Having two teachers in the room, on a steady basis, is good for the kids. It means that there are two people that the kids can depend on.”

-First grade classroom teacher in Queens

WEAKNESSES

1. DIFFICULTIES IN INTEGRATING FLOATING TEACHERS

- In all three of the schools surveyed, floating teachers have been hired in place of paraprofessionals. When the floating teacher is inexperienced, s/he may be viewed as a less valuable addition to a classroom than an experienced paraprofessional.

“I question how much of a help it [having floating teacher] really is. I don’t know if having floating teachers is as much of help as when I had paraprofessionals. The paraprofessionals could free up some of the teachers’ time, and some of the paraprofessionals were so good that they could do some of the teaching as well.”

- Principal in Brooklyn

“With this program I get fewer ‘bodies’ than I used to. I used to get one paraprofessional for every two classes, and now I get one teacher for five classes.”

- Principal in Brooklyn

“Having a paraprofessional in the room is a better option. Having the floating teachers is not bad, but its not necessarily good...Having a paraprofessional is better because they are there all the time, and many of them are experienced.”

- Kindergarten classroom teacher in Brooklyn

- Floating teachers and classroom teachers are being asked to work as a team without being trained on how that should be done.

“At first, I was very discouraged when I heard that I was going to have a [floating] teacher. I found out the day before school started...In the beginning it was very chaotic. There should have been training for them and for us.”

- First grade classroom teacher in Queens

“I never had training on using a [floating] teacher, so before I felt like I was short-changing the [floating] teacher or not using her properly.”

- First grade classroom teacher in Queens

- Classroom teachers may feel that having a floating teacher in their classroom does nothing more than add to their workload.

“The classroom teachers are working hard to train [the floating teacher]. The floating teachers provide a relief, but they also create something more for the teachers to do.”

- Principal in Brooklyn

“Many of the classroom teachers that we have are inexperienced and they don’t have time to train other teachers.”

- Assistant Principal in Queens

“Instead of being relieved by the work that I can give to [my floating teacher], I have to worry about supervising a professional – that is not my domain. I find it a burden more than a relief.”

- First grade classroom teacher in Brooklyn

- Classroom teachers may feel that they are unfairly held responsible for the work of the floating teacher assigned to them.

“My name is on the students’ report cards. I am the one who is accountable to the parents and I take that seriously... I am always worried about the responsibilities that I give to the [floating] teacher.”

- First grade classroom teacher in Brooklyn

“I was originally very upset about having a [floating] teacher. I had all the responsibility and this teacher just comes in – if something went wrong I’d be the one who was responsible.”

- First grade classroom teacher in Queens

- Using floating teachers is more complicated than reducing class size in that the principal must find a floating teacher that can work well with each of the classroom teachers to which s/he will be assigned. There were hints that a proper “match” had not always taken place.

“Given the proper circumstances, it can be a good experience to learn from another teacher – but the teachers have to be placed properly.”

- First and second grade floating teacher in Queens

- Floating teachers are viewed as an inadequate replacement for class size reduction.

“[Using floating teachers] is second best. The best thing would be to have the space to actually reduce class size.”

- Principal in Brooklyn

“If I had my choice, they would build new schools and make the classes smaller. If I had 18 children, I could sail with them!”

- Kindergarten classroom teacher in Brooklyn

“Small class size gives more time for each student to share their ideas, more time to talk and reflect. There are also less distractions overall, less interruptions and fidgeting.”

- First grade classroom teacher in Queens

“Small class sizes are the ideal.”

- Assistant Principal in Queens

2. ASSIGNMENT AND SCHEDULING PROBLEMS

- **The claim is made that floating teachers are always engaged in small group work. In the three schools visited, the substance of the work that the floating teachers do is determined by each of the classroom teachers with whom they work. The classroom teachers have not been instructed to utilize the floating teachers' time in any particular way, which means that the floating teacher may become an assistant to the classroom teacher rather than a team teacher.**

“The substance of the work I do depends on the class I am in and the time of the day. I work with the classroom teacher on the things they need help with.”

- Kindergarten floating teacher in Brooklyn

- **Rather than providing instruction to students in a manner that could be considered a surrogate for reduced class size, some floating teachers are being used to provide remediation.**

“Sometimes I work one-on-one with a kid who is having difficulty with a concept. Sometimes I work with a small group of two to four students who need extra help... If the teacher notices that a kid is having a problem, I am told to work with that kid.”

- Kindergarten floating teacher in Brooklyn

“The children with the greatest needs work with the floating teacher.”

- Principal in Brooklyn

- **Floating teachers and classroom teachers may find that their schedules do not provide time for them to work on lesson plans together or to discuss the difficulties and gains of the students with whom they work.**

“We communicate during the lunch period or during class. There is no extra planning time.”

- Kindergarten floating teacher in Brooklyn

“We talk very quickly about where we are, which kids need help. We don’t really have much time to plan together though. It’s unfair because of that.”

- First grade classroom teacher in Queens

- **At times, floating teachers may be expected to cover for absent classroom teachers.**

“Two weeks ago I moved the floating teacher into a full-time Kindergarten position because the Kindergarten teacher became ill. The Kindergarten teacher is expected to return by the end of the month and then the floating teacher will return to her regular assignment.”

- Principal in Brooklyn

3. ATTITUDES OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

- **Principals and Assistant Principals may not have a sense of ownership over this program. Floating teachers were provided by the school districts, and the only decision being made at the school level was how to assign the floating teachers.**

“We haven’t been able to develop a cohesive ‘push-in’ program. I would love to see staff development from the District...We do staff development in school on Tuesday mornings, but there just isn’t enough time to do everything that needs to be done.”

- Assistant Principal in Queens

- **Rather than assign the floating teachers to one or two classrooms, some principals may feel that they have to assign the floating teachers to a number of classrooms in order for the staff to feel that this resource is being evenly distributed. This “fairness” issue may explain why some schools have assigned floating teachers to so many classrooms.**

“I need to ensure that the floating teachers’ time is being spread out fairly.”

- Principal in Brooklyn

Conclusion

Without a larger number of interviews, it is difficult to determine whether floating teachers have been used to replace paraprofessionals, which would constitute supplanting of local funding by federal funding. In schools where floating teachers are assigned to ten or more classes a week, the floating teachers may be covering the ‘prep’ periods of classroom teachers, thereby reducing the number of cluster teachers [and art, music, and sports programs] within a school. This has always been a ‘grey’ area of supplanting.

Similarly, it would take a more extensive study to understand whether the lack of program design, guidelines, planning, and scheduling for consultations between classroom teachers and floating teachers was due to poor implementation at the central,

district or school level. Up to 3% of federal funds for class size reduction can be used for the administration of this program and the administration of teacher training and recruitment programs. Administrative costs are an allowable expense under the federal guidelines. In FY 2001, this comes to over \$1.9 million. There does not appear to be sufficient oversight of this program.

A short monitoring study of just three schools and comprising only thirteen interviews has provided us with these insights:

- 1. *The introduction of floating teachers at the school level appears to require more coordination than the reduction of class size.***
 - Some classroom teachers appear to be uncomfortable in the role of supervisor of other teachers.
 - Two professionals have to be “matched” in terms of temperament, approach to teaching, and schedules (so as to allow for consultation time).
 - The number of classroom assignments given to a floating teacher and the schedule of activities within the classroom determine whether the floating teacher will actually be doing “small group” instruction or merely acting as a classroom assistant.
 - Issues of “fairness” have resulted in administrators sending floating teachers to too many classes.
 - If not properly introduced, floating teachers could easily fall victim to being perceived by classroom teachers and administrators as “less worthy” or “less responsible” teachers – in other words, second-class professionals.
- 2. *School-level administrators and teachers appear to perceive the floating teacher program as another central or district initiative imposed on their schools and have no sense of “ownership” of the program or of responsibility for its success.***
 - Classroom teachers miss having “their” paraprofessional.
 - In the past, remediation teachers, called by various titles, such as “Title 1 Reading Teacher” or “Push-In Teacher,” have come from a pool of experienced teachers at the district or school level. In contrast, most of these “floating” teachers are new. Training them is perceived as a burden by teachers and school administrators.
 - Floating teachers have had to be integrated into the classrooms of existing teachers. In the past, all new teachers were either classroom or cluster teachers with similar assignments. Most schools have an established protocol, whether good or inadequate, for helping new classroom or cluster teachers. None exist for this hybrid teacher.

- This new type of teacher, with floating assignments, is viewed as a program originating beyond the school level with little choice given to school administrators.
 - School administrators seem to be unclear as to their supervisory role over floating teachers or their value beyond being another adult in the classroom.
3. *Though not intentional, the main value of the floating teacher program may be that it is a pre-service program long advocated for inexperienced teachers. The most frequent positive comment about the program was that it was providing floating teachers with a range of observation and instructional tasks that would help them when they secured a classroom teaching position.*